DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 237 028 HE 016 806

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TITLE College Curriculum: Shape, Influence, and Assessment. Staff Analysis of a Panel Discussion Conducted by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (Kingston, Rhode Island, August 27-28, 1982).
INSTITUTION National Commission on Excellence in Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Aug 82
NOTE 12p.; For a related document, see HE 016 805.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Articulation (Education); College Credits; *College Curriculum; *College Instruction; College School Cooperation; Degrees (Academic); *Educational Quality; *General Education; Liberal Arts; Postsecondary Education; Student Characteristics
IDENTIFIERS Blue Ribbon Commissions; *Excellence; National Commission on Excellence in Education

ABSTRACT

Perspectives on characteristics of college curricula, their influence, and assessment are analyzed, based on a 1982 panel held for the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Discussion topics pertaining to programs and degrees included the proliferation of programs, the college credit hour, changing student constituencies, vocationalism and its effects, and institutional values. Topics concerning the course included the quality of instruction, teaching strategies, the institutional commitment of faculty, and student motivation and expectations. In addition, issues regarding the influence of college curricula on high schools were addressed. Conclusions of the panel include the following: (1) the quality of undergraduate teaching is more important than the content of curriculum in the search for excellence; (2) changes in the course offerings of general education requirements in colleges do influence what high schools offer and what high school students take; (3) and although integrative, or synthetic, thinking is difficult for college students to master, most college curricula do not address this thinking mode. Additional concerns include: the cost of excellence, advocacy for liberal/general education, the role of federal aid, and the value of personal improvement courses. (SW)

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HE 016 806

COLLEGE CURRICULUM: SHAPE, INFLUENCE, AND ASSESSMENT

Staff Analysis of a Panel Discussion Conducted by
The National Commission on Excellence in Education
at the University of Rhode Island, Kingston, R.I.
August 27-28, 1982

I. DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY

On August 27-28, 1982, six members of the National Commission on Excellence in Education conducted a panel meeting on the subject of college curriculum--its changing shape, assessment, and influence on secondary schools. The meeting was hosted by the University of Rhode Island and was attended by an extraordinarily active audience of over 80 educators and citizens from four states. The audience also included representatives of such national organizations as the American Council on Education, the American Association of Colleges, and the College Board, and of such federal agencies as the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Center for Education Statistics, and the Office of Postsecondary Education.

The issues of the panel discussion were framed by three sets of materials distributed prior to the meeting:

1) Four (4) Commissioned Papers judged to be of extraordinarily high quality:

   - o "The Secondary School-College Connection and Other Matters: a Historical Assessment," by Frederick Rudolph of Williams College, Williamstown, Mass.
   - o "The Faculty Role in Providing Evidence of Educational Excellence," by Jonathan Warren of the Educational Testing Service, Berkeley, Calif.
   - o "A Little Light on the Subject: Keeping General and Liberal Education Alive," by Zelda Gamson of the Univ. of Michigan
   - o "Academic Standards in the American Community College," by Howard London of Bridgewater State College, Bridgewater, Mass

   The draft of a fifth paper, "The Demographic Basis of College Curriculum," by Herman Blake of the University of California at Santa Cruz was distributed at the meeting itself.

2) Examination materials drawn from two experimental assessment programs of college student learning: the Comprehensive Outcomes Measurement Project (ACT) and the Academic Competences in General Education examination. Prior to the meeting, the Commissioners scored 66 written student responses to 12 questions selected from the latter.

3) An elaborate background briefing paper that sought to focus the Commission's attention on eight (8) issues:

- o the effects of the proliferation of courses and degrees;
- o the effects of the credit system on student learning;
- o time as the principal ground of postsecondary credentials;
- o college exit standards and General Education requirements;
- o changes in the student constituency of higher education;
- o the quality of college teaching and the learning behaviors of college students;
- o the potential and limitations of technology in postsecondary education; and
- o the virtues and drawbacks of various forms of assessing student learning in colleges.

It was acknowledged in the briefing paper that there were more questions under these topics than could possibly be covered in a day-and-a-half of discussion, and, indeed, many of the questions were left untouched.

For the first day, the Commissioners were joined in a public-seminar format by the writers of the five commissioned papers and staff. Each paper author presented a short (10 minute) summary of the highlights of his/her work and recommendations to the Commission. A member of the staff summarized the current status of a project analyzing changes in high school student course-taking patterns in relationship to changes in college curricula and exit requirements for the years 1964-1980. The subsequent discussion was structured around three sets of issues:

1) Programs and Degrees (proliferation, the accounting system, credit, time, appropriateness to student constituencies, vocationalism and its effects, institutional values);
2) The Course (quality of teaching, instructional strategies, the institutional commitment of faculty, student motivations and expectations);
3) The Influence of College Curriculum on High Schools (proliferation of courses, credit, vocationalism and student expectations, relationships between college and high school faculty).

The discussion of these issues was carried out in a rather unusual manner, involving intense (and sometimes fragmented) interchanges among the panelists, Commissioners, and at least a third of the audience. In the words of one Commissioner, this audience was "open, open-hearted, and hungry for such serious exchanges of ideas," and demonstrated the potential for high quality discussions after the issuance of the Final Report. One might say, in fact, that, in coordination with the Chair pro diem, the audience was largely responsible for shaping the content of the discussions though it took its clues well from the background briefing paper and kept the focus on the subject matter at hand.

The subject of the Saturday morning discussions was assessment. Commissioners and panelists considered the place and use of assessments in colleges and universities, the types of generic capacities that a new generation of these instruments is attempting to measure, and the relationship between these assessments and the improvement of writing. The Commissioners also considered their own "scoring" of student responses on one of these assessments, and what those responses indicated concerning areas in which students seem to have difficulty.

Prior to the meeting, Commissioners had also read Alexander Astin's paper on "value-added" as a concept for defining excellence in education. At the Saturday morning panel, the Commissioners heard a report on the longest-running major project employing value-added measures at the postsecondary level. This report was provided by Dean Whitla, Director of the Office of Undergraduate Instructional Improvement at Harvard, whose data involve measures on changes in student performance in a variety of areas (e.g. communication, analysis, grammar, moral reasoning, mastering new information), from freshman to senior year. Whitla discussed how one interprets value-added measures and what they demonstrate about who learns the most in college. He also presented data on changes in CEEB achievement test scores over the past 15 years (the declines are more dramatic than those of the SATs, --particularly in the number of students scoring above 700) as a gloss on the challenges facing colleges which would measure their effectiveness through the value-added strategy.

"The good news," Whitla said, "is that value can be added. The bad news is that we are falling behind in doing so." A paper summarizing this presentation is due in late September, and will be distributed to all Commissioners for further discussion.

II. Findings: Discussion

1. THE QUALITY OF UNDERGRADUATE TEACHING IS FAR MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE PRECISE CONTENT OF CURRICULUM IN THE SEARCH FOR EXCELLENCE.

The discussion of this issue was multidimensional, and pointed out that, to be effective, college faculty need to know a great deal more about their students, about cognitive development, and about pedagogy. They also need to know more about their potential students, hence about secondary schools and secondary school curriculum. It was pointed out that there is a difference between teaching a discipline, teaching students, and teaching students' capacities. By the latter alone can a college faculty member learn what it is that students find most difficult (e.g. synthetic or integrative thinking) and redirect his/her efforts toward developing such generic capacities.

While it was agreed that the graduate schools have to take on more responsibility for the education of future college professors as teachers (and not leave the task, as they do now, to the institution of first employment), both current and future faculty need to make an institutional commitment to education. Colleges and universities can encourage such a commitment, in turn, by supporting the faculty's commitments as professionals. That does not mean salary increases or monetary awards for excellence in teaching as much as rewards through the tenure and promotion system, in restructuring instructional time, in research support, in sponsoring pedagogical clinics, and in developing informal working groups of faculty around educational problems. Indeed, the encouragement of small communities of faculty and students--even within large institutions--can go a long way toward developing within faculty that critical institutional commitment.

It was also suggested that if college faculty made an effort to share their goals, objectives and teaching methods in courses with students, faculty themselves would be better able to articulate and understand what they are really trying to teach, and would play a key role in breaking down student passivity.

2. WITHIN THE PRECISE CONTENT OF CURRICULUM, CONTROLLED DIVERSITY IS HIGHLY DESIRABLE.

By "controlled diversity" is meant the imposition of a manageable number of frameworks (programs, departments, and degrees) on the immense body of knowledge that is addressed in higher education, and the opportunity for students to explore that knowledge without getting either lost or trapped in narrowly defined fields.

With this idea in mind, the value not only of Liberal Education but of competing models of Liberal Education within the same institution was reaffirmed. And as Liberal Education is a way to help students hold their options open as long as possible, it applies on the high school level as well.

Colleges and universities, it was agreed, have a penchant for adding new courses and programs with every advance of knowledge about either a discipline or an identified student need. Thus, for example, there is now a competition for the inclusion of "new literacies," such as computer literacy (though no one seems to be able to define "computer literacy" in a convincing way), in the curriculum. Panelists suggested that these literacies can be integrated into the structure and processes of existing courses and programs without creating new ones.

The more specialized the degree program, the more likely it is to be vocational or pre-professional. The idea that vocationalism--particularly in community colleges--stifles students' intellectual development and has a particularly negative effect on minorities, was underscored. It was pointed out, for example, that the literature on education and careers shows that, outside of the health fields, the majority of community college vocational graduates do not obtain stable jobs in their fields. The value of more liberal arts courses in their curricula, courses that might develop the intellectual capacities necessary to adapt to change, was thus recognized.

3. CHANGES IN THE COURSE OFFERINGS AND THE SHAPE OF GENERAL EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS IN COLLEGES DO, IN FACT, INFLUENCE WHAT HIGH SCHOOLS OFFER AND WHAT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TAKE.

It was demonstrated with reference to a transcript analysis project in which the Commission staff is currently engaged that there has been a significant change in the course-taking patterns of high school students between the mid and late 1960s and the late 1970s and that changes in the form and amount of college General Education requirements in the years 1967-1974 appear coincidentally responsible. As colleges moved toward emphasizing the smorgasbord distribution system in General

Education programs, high school catalogues started to resemble college catalogues and high school student transcripts started to resemble college student transcripts. What was once (in the 1960s) a course with a generic title such as "English 3" at 1.0 Carnegie Units appears now to be two courses at 0.5 Carnegie Units each and with titles like "Introduction to the Novel" or "Mass Media."

While high schools and high school students tend to pay attention to changes in college exit standards expressed in terms of course requirements, panelists felt it was doubtful that either high schools or students attend as well to changes in standards of proficiency, whether in specific disciplines (e.g. foreign languages) or in generic cognitive skills (e.g. "quantitative reasoning").

4. PERSONAL SERVICE COURSES, WHETHER OFFERED IN HIGH SCHOOLS OR COLLEGES, MAY HAVE LIMITED UTILITY FOR SOME STUDENTS, BUT DO NOT CHALLENGE THE MAJORITY.

We also noted that high schools, sometimes driven by legislative action, are now granting more credit for co-curricular and personal service courses, e.g. driver education, health education, personal finance, non-vocational cooking and consumer education. Such credit-bearing courses naturally eat into the academic core of what secondary school students take. That many colleges (particularly land grant universities, state colleges, and community colleges) also offer such courses for "additive credit" (i.e. credit that counts toward the degree) only blurs the notion of the function of education in our society. That is to say that we Americans have always taken a utilitarian attitude toward education and seem to be unable to make up their minds as to whether education should prepare us for daily living or develop our minds.

The discussion of this issue was extraordinarily lively. One school of thought maintained that, at the high school level, personal service courses serve legitimate ends for the increasing number of immigrants, children from single-parent homes, and other culturally disadvantaged children who otherwise would rarely have the opportunity to learn —among peers—how to deal with economic and personal problems in an increasingly complex society.

The second approach to this issue held that the growth of the personal service courses represented an abdication of academic leadership, and that by allowing a cafeteria style curriculum that includes such courses we ultimately do a disservice to students. In light of the changing demography of education, and particularly in light of the increasing numbers of minority students, it was held, the opportunity to take personal service courses should be minimized least, in the words of one panelist, those students "learn only later that they have been shortchanged in education."

Still a third approach to this issue held that, at the high school level, if these courses are taught well and with rigor, and if they are

offered as options beyond the 16 or 17 Carnegie Units of basic academic courses, then there may be some virtue to them in helping students grow.

There was a debate as to whether courses like these should be credit bearing at all or whether the credits should be "non-additive," but there was no resolution to the question.

5. INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION HAVE A PARTICULAR RESPONSIBILITY TO DISPLAY ETHICAL BEHAVIOR AND TO UPHOLD BOTH PUBLIC AND ACADEMIC VALUES.

This is an issue of the "hidden curriculum," and the discussion emphasized that, in higher education, students learn ethical values by living in contexts that display them every day. We don't need college level courses in morality or how to know a value when you see one, it was contended. Rather, colleges and universities must be exemplary moral environments as they have a powerful influence on young adults who are in process of separation from home environments. Some examples with respect to cheating, the double-standard in the academic treatment of college athletes, dishonesty in faculty research, etc. might have been used, but weren't. The idea, however, was that institutional behavior with respect to such ethical problems sends very strong signals to students.

It was also pointed out that if colleges and universities emphasize only the disciplines and/or vocationalism, they retreat from sensitivity to human values and public virtues like respect and courage. Again, students learn from such emphases in institutional statements and behavior.

6. THE CREDIT SYSTEM DOES NOT PRESENT A MAGICAL FORMULA THAT CERTIFIES WHAT STUDENTS HAVE ACTUALLY LEARNED, BUT WE HAVE TO FIND CONSTRUCTIVE WAYS OF LIVING WITH IT.

This issue was not treated as extensively as Commissioners and staff had hoped. Panelists seems to be reaching for various accomodations to the credit system even while recognizing that, in the words of one, it is a political creation that sends unfortunate messages to students, is often abused, and serves to fragment learning.

One method suggested for getting around the message that credit equals knowledge was to certify student learning, hence strengthen the significance of a credential such as the B.A., by aggregating what we now do with individual examinations in courses. In other words, we might develop certifying examinations covering patterns or groups of courses,and that is quite different from the old baccalaureate "comprehensive" examinations, though the former certainly does not preclude the latter. Nor does it preclude the continuing use of the credit system for the kinds of accounting purposes that all but small colleges require in order to function as organizations.

Of course there would be problems in developing such examinations because at each level of aggregation one loses critical specifics, but the task of working on the idea might help college faculty articulate curriculum much better than is the case today.

Likewise, an increased emphasis on small communities of learners, generic competencies, explications of what students should be able to do when they finish a course, and mastery learning, it was suggested, would all serve to devalue "the great credit chase" in the minds of students, freeing them to focus on learning.

7. INTEGRATIVE (OR "SYNTHETIC") THINKING IS THE MOST DIFFICULT FORM OF THOUGHT FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS TO MASTER, YET MOST COLLEGES HAVE GIVEN LITTLE CONSIDERATION TO ADVANCING SYNTHETIC THINKING IN THE CURRICULUM.

Most college curricula tend to focus on analytic modes of thought. What colleges generally mean by stating such educational objectives as "developing critical thinking skills" is analysis--and analysis within the confines of specific disciplines. Indeed, college faculty are more comfortable with such objectives because their broader professional environments emphasize the discipline for itself and not in its relationship to other bodies of knowledge. Synthesis, or integrative thinking, that relies more on models and abstractions, thus tends to get lost in college curricula.

While it was suggested that individual faculty can introduce more integrative thinking in individual courses, it was also pointed out that an entire curriculum structured around synthetic concepts and goals can yield the same outcomes. "Everything isn't equal in the world of curriculum," noted one panelist; "there may be two or three ways to learn a language, but there are a multiplicity of ways to learn to think synthetically."

8. CREATIVE USES OF ASSESSMENT ARE KEY TO HELPING COLLEGE FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TO CLARIFYING THE MEANING OF COLLEGE DEGREES.

Colleges and universities must begin to use tests in a variety of ways, and not merely for mid-term or end-term assessment within individual classes. In fact, it is at the level of program and curriculum--and not the individual course--that assessments are truly significant.

Assessment programs are necessary for institutional self-evaluation, faculty development, and student understanding of the aims and processes of education. They may also revivify the accreditation process, which has fallen into some disrepute in recent years because accreditation teams tend to certify colleges and universities on the basis of inputs (e.g. facilities, number of volumes in libraries, percentage of Pd.D.s on the faculty, etc.) and actuarial types of outputs (e.g. student credit hours or numbers of degrees awarded), and not on the basis of what actually happens to students as a result.

Colleges and universities that agree on their educational objectives can work cooperatively to determine ways of measuring the qualities they desire in their graduates. It was demonstrated that by involving faculty in the generation and validation of tests to be used in program assessment, the quality of college teaching is improved. After all, in order to develop tests and assessment programs that measure changes or

"value-added" in student learning, faculty are forced to reflect on what one panelist called "the heartland of undergraduate education," and articulate both their objectives and pedagogical methods.

It was agreed that such tests that are developed must require written (as opposed to multiple-choice) responses, not only for the sake of the signals that written examinations send concerning the importance of writing, but more significantly to detect student competences that objective tests cannot reveal. Too, the methods of demonstrating generic cognitive abilities are coincidental with those of writing, hence writing is certainly the most efficient test of those abilities.

In analyzing the results of assessment programs, it was urged that colleges and universities seek to correlate student achievement as closely as possible with college experiences--academic and otherwise--so that an institution can learn better what to recommend to faculty, departments and students that will lead to improved performance.

A final--and very significant--potential by-product of the increased use of valid and reliable tests of generic competences (particularly in combination with a reinvigoration of the General Education curriculum) may be a strengthening of college degrees.

III. ISSUES FOR THE FINAL REPORT

1) WHAT WILL EXCELLENCE COST?

Assuming the Final Report articulates the qualities and/or processes that go into excellence, there will be distinct economic implications that cannot be avoided. Even minor adjustments in school or college curriculum, testing, guidance, etc. will cost somebody something. Even panel discussions of the Commission's recommendations in each state or high school/college articulation commissions do not come free. And while further talk is comparatively cheap, what it does is to set the state for action--which is not cheap.

In an age in which every $1,000 counts, the Commission will be perceived as naive if it ducks the issue of cost altogether, and will appear excessively idealistic if it claims either that adjustments can be made with virtually no cost or that business and industry will fund it all. In either case, the bottom line will be a lack of credibility.

What, then, is suggested? First, that the Commission not duck the issue. And when it takes its first cut at recommendations, it do so with respect to the qualities and processes it thinks will lead to excellence in education--regardless of cost. Then and only then can it ask--and with both reference to existing programs and in consultations with experts in educational finance--what the cost implications of its recommendations are and how to think about alternative and cost-efficient versions of those recommendations. The second cut at recommendations, then, can be shaped, in part, by realistic cost assessments.

As one panelist at Kingston noted, it was particularly gratifying that the discussion did not focus on the cliches of retrenchment and survival, rather on what is best for students and what contributes to excellence. And as another added, "if, with respect to a certain sensible recommendation, someone says, 'but we can't pay for it,' then that person wants something less than excellence."

2) RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING FURTHER RESEARCH

It is evident from comments and testimony at the Commission's hearings and panels, as well as from commissioned papers, that the basic research agenda on American education has slighted some important issues, e.g. connections between learning mathematics and learning to read. It is also evident that we have failed to collect, constistently, fine-grained data on educational programs, processes, and progress at all levels. We have found, too, that teachers, professors, school and college administrators, school board members, and state education officials alike want to know more about the practical effects of various educational strategies.

But a Final Report cannot answer every major educational concern with the nostrum that "we need more research." Rather, we should carefully select and prioritize a finite set of basic and applied research issues, and indicate which are operationally feasible through Federal sponsorship and which can be carried out at least on the state level--if not at the local level (school, district, or college).

3) ADVOCACY FOR LIBERAL/GENERAL EDUCATION: VIRTUES AND LIMITATIONS

We have heard in nearly every context (panels, hearings, papers) and from nearly every quarter (employers, teachers, school board members, college administrators) that a strong liberal education is essential for all students. Particularly in a highly technological and specialized society undergoing rapid change, a strong background in the basic Liberal Arts disciplines (e.g. history, foreign languages, physical and life sciences, mathematics, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, economics, etc.) provides students with a flexibility not found in vocational and narrowly pre-professional programs. This is so, it has been claimed, because the Liberal Arts tend to address the development of higher order cognitive abilities of a <u>generic</u> nature. To be sure, though, the evidence we have to support such contentions comes to us largely through anecdotes or descriptive studies.

Nonetheless, students seem to be getting different messages--from parents, peers, and the press--and continually flee into the false security of vocationally-oriented programs. The value of the credential they earn, then, is ephemeral.

What, then, does the Commission do with the Liberal Education issue in the Final Report? Three (3) guidelines are suggested:

(1) We cannot make excessive claims for Liberal Education, e.g. that more of it is better for the whole society, or that there are positive civic effects, or that those who have it lead

richer and happier lives.

(2) But someone's bluff has to be called, or we will have been but traders in lip-service. If employers truly believe what they tell us concerning their preference for those with a strong liberal arts background, and if students choose careers and courses on the basis of what it take to get a job, then employers (not the CEOs, but the personnel officers) have to go public on Liberal Education. That Commission can legitimately challenge employers to provide evidence of their stated values in actual hiring practices. There is no stronger statement that could be made to students, particularly college students.

(3) We nonetheless should allow for the unique relationship between the Liberal Arts and vocational programs in both high schools and community colleges. Given the compressed time frame for credentials involved in the latter, we cannot swing to an extreme with respect to General Education requirements. As Gamson's paper pointed out, as London indicated in the panel discussion, and as many of the profiles of notable programs we have received can demonstrate, there are creative and constructive ways for reconciling career and Liberal Arts education in community colleges.

4) THE FEDERAL ROLE IN HIGHER EDUCATION (AGAIN): INDIVIDUAL AND/OR INSTITUTIONAL ASSISTANCE.

As the Commissioners are well aware, a major shift in Federal policy with respect to postsecondary education took place in the 1970s. Instead of placing its principal emphasis on funding institutions and institutional programs through categorical grant competitions, Federal aid to higher education shifted to individuals. This shift accompanied the evolution of American higher education from a mass to a universal system in which access was the password and equity the objective.

However, it has been our experience working with the Commission that nearly 2/3rds of the individual programs in colleges and universities that have been cited for their exemplary qualities in testimony at hearings and panels or that have been referenced in commissioned papers or that have been nominated as "notable" in the context of our searches for efforts toward excellence, received their initial or major developmental funding from such Federal agencies as the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, or the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education.

What this suggests is that there may still be a viable role for Federal assistance to postsecondary institutions: to seed or to help develop locally-designed programs that promise to enhance excellence and to encouraging such programs to evaluate their outcomes and demonstrate their effectiveness.

In its Final Report, the Commission may thus consider the virtues of this limited and non-intrusive Federal role in assisting the most

promising educational programs of American postsecondary institutions as a complement to our current national policy of financial assistance to individual college students.